

Storms of passion in the *Aeneid*

Bob Cowan

Virgil strikingly starts his epic, the *Aeneid*, with the description of a violent storm which wrecks the hero's ships. Bob Cowan examines why he may have made this choice and how this storm metaphorically foreshadows themes, such as the breaking out and controlling of frenzied rage, which will recur later in the poem.

It was a dark and stormy night... We are used to storms as a way to start horror movies, as one more broken-down car grinds to a halt outside yet another gothic mansion lit up by flashes of lightning to the sound of thunder-claps, but why does Virgil start the *Aeneid* with a storm? Of course, it's a dramatic and arresting way to grab the audience's attention, and to show your main character in a testing situation, but in a poem as complex as the *Aeneid* we might wonder whether there is more to this storm than meets the eyes and ears.

When is a wind not a wind? Juno and Aeolus

It's Juno who starts the storm and sets the whole poem in motion. Her hostility to Aeneas and the Trojans has many causes: sexual jealousy of Jupiter's pretty-boy 'cup-bearer', the Trojan Ganymede; piqued resentment that Paris judged Venus more beautiful than her; love for the Greeks who attacked Troy and the Carthaginians who would later attack Rome. Yet we also get the impression that Juno enjoys causing chaos for its own sake. Certainly she is always associated with the stormy regions of the lower air (*aer*) in contrast to the serene calm of Jupiter's upper air (*aether*). Virgil could even be thinking of Plato's claim that the name of Juno's Greek equivalent, Hera, was derived from being an anagram of *aer* (the *h* doesn't count in Greek). So we might not be surprised that this tempestuous goddess of chaos chooses a storm as her first means of attacking Aeneas.

Her tool is Aeolus, the minor god put in charge of keeping the winds under control. These are serious winds. Just in case we are tempted to think of stiff breezes and the minor inconvenience of umbrellas being blown inside-out, Virgil makes it

clear that Jupiter locked them up in a massive cave and set Aeolus on guard because otherwise they would destroy land, sea, and heaven, the whole universe.

Here is the first hint that these winds are not just winds. They represent the forces of chaos and disorder in the universe which, if they are not kept under firm control, can cut loose and wreak massive destruction.

The description of Aeolus' cave gives us another answer to the question 'when is a wind not a wind?'. These winds are angry. They 'roar' (*fremunt*) not just because winds make that kind of noise but because they are 'outraged' (*indignant*). Aeolus keeps them under control by soothing their 'tempers' (*animi*) and their 'rages' (*irae*). Above all, these winds are 'frenzied' (*furentes*).

Frenzy or *furor* is the most pervasive and destructive force in the *Aeneid*. It can take the form of sexual obsession, as it drives Dido to bitter curses and suicide, and interestingly she and her sister Anna are compared in book four to storm-winds battering the unbending oak that is Aeneas. It can take the form of murderous greed, as when it drives Dido's brother Pygmalion to murder her husband Sychaeus. Above all, it drives men to war and especially to civil war. Jupiter's great speech of comfort and prophecy to Venus ends in a glorious image (even more glorious to war-traumatized Romans) of the restoration of peace after a century of civil war, as 'Unholy Frenzy' (*Furor impius*) – which here means the frenzied impulse to fight civil war – sits roaring but impotent, bound by a hundred bronze chains.

Aeolus' winds do not only share this quality of *furor*. They represent it. The storm which engulfs Aeneas and the Trojans is not purely allegorical, but it does symbolize the effects which the many faces of *furor* have when they are unleashed upon the world. In the same

way, the calming of the storm offers us some ideas about how the forces of *furor* can be overcome. But before we look at how Virgil ends the storm, it will be worth looking ahead to book seven, where Juno again lets loose storms, but of a rather different kind.

These passionate Latins! Allecto's storm of frenzy

Everyone knows that the *Aeneid* is a game of two halves. Virgil himself blows the whistle for the second half early in book seven by asking the Muse to tell him the causes of the war in Latium, starting a 'greater work' than the first. Yet it briefly looks as though the poem is going to come to a very rapid end. The Trojan embassy to Latinus, king of the Latins, is very successful and it seems that Aeneas might marry Lavinia and establish the Roman people before we've got to line 300. Muses aren't enough to get an epic moving. As we saw in book one, only one goddess is up to the job of kick-starting the *Aeneid*, the queen of the storms, Juno, and here she comes again.

Juno is quite up-front about her failed attempt to foil Aeneas' mission with the storm in book one (not to mention books two, three, and five), and that she has to start again. She had no luck with the gods above, like Aeolus, so she will set the powers of Hell in motion. She summons the Fury, Allecto, from the Underworld, a demonic figure so malignant and evil that even her sister-Furies hate her. Just as she had secured the services of the subservient god Aeolus, so she commands Allecto here to do her will. In a weird, perverted hymn, Juno lists the Fury's ancestry, her powers and her sphere of influence: turning brother against brother, overturning households with hatred, and skilled to do harm in a thousand ways. Just as Juno made Aeolus let loose the real storms which might destroy the universe, so she orders Allecto to unleash storms of passion whose effect will be no less catastrophic.

Allecto sets to work on Latinus' wife, Amata, who always wanted Lavinia to marry Turnus – wanted it a bit too much, in many people's opinion. She also drives

Turnus himself from calm sarcasm to a frenzy of bloodlust. Finally, by diverting an arrow shot by Aeneas' son, Ascanius, so that it kills the beloved pet stag of a local girl, she drives a large group of Latin peasants to a passion for war against the Trojans.

Virgil uses a wide range of imagery throughout Allecto's sinister adventures to represent the madness with which she infects people. She throws a poisonous snake at Amata, who ends up spinning like a child's top; Turnus gets a flaming torch in the chest, and is said to be like a simmering cauldron superheated to boiling point. Yet the parallel between the storm of passion which Allecto unleashes and Aeolus' literal storm is never far from our minds, and it comes back to the forefront when the Latin people begin to riot and demand that Latinus declare war on the Trojans.

Latinus is compared to a great rock being battered on all sides by a stormy sea. When the king himself wails 'We are being struck by a storm', the parallel between the real storm of book one and the metaphorical storm of book seven is complete. We might even go as far as to read the real storm as a kind of allegory for the storms of passion which Virgil is really interested in. Latinus, like Aeolus, is a king with responsibility for controlling these 'storms', and for making sure that they don't cut loose and destroy the world. Like Aeolus, Latinus is too weak a leader to fulfil this responsibility. He locks himself in his room and, as the metaphor shifts, lets go of the reins of power. The chariot of state is left to hurtle to destruction.

Calm down, calm down

To return to book one, it is no coincidence that the storm which is started by the female divinity Juno, using a pretty nymph as a bribe, is calmed by the very masculine god Neptune. While there are some notable exceptions on either side, the *Aeneid*, like the Roman culture in which it was written, generally equates order and reason with masculinity, chaos and passion with femininity. Neptune has all the authority of a Roman father and in this is like his brother Jupiter, father of gods and men, whose smile to Venus is the same one with which he clears the sky of storms.

We shouldn't get too carried away in seeing Neptune as a high-minded restorer of peace and order. Virgil more than hints that a lot of his reaction is based on prickliness that Aeolus and the winds have gone beyond their authority and interfered with his territory. He almost loses his temper and gives in to his own frenzy, but controls himself, abruptly stops what he was about to say (a technique called *aposiopesis*,

'silencing oneself'), and gets on with calming the storm. Even if he is not only a force for order, he certainly is one.

Yet Neptune is not the only masculine figure of order, reason, and authority in this scene. He is compared, in the first simile of the whole *Aeneid*, to a man who, because of the weight of authority which his virtues and achievements give him, is able to calm a rioting mob with his soothing words. This is a remarkable simile in all sorts of ways. Though Virgil does not explicitly say so, it seems clear that the setting is contemporary Rome. As often, he reinforces the links between the simile and the events it's 'like', and of particular interest is the way that 'frenzy provides weapons' to the mob and the man 'soothes' their hearts, taking us back to Aeolus soothing his frenzied winds.

Most strikingly of all, he reverses the usual relationship of narrative and simile. Similes usually compare a human activity to something in nature, so that Homeric heroes might be like lions, or even a swarming army like a storm. To reverse this by comparing nature to human activities makes the reader question what is going on. One answer – and it is only one answer – is that Virgil is reversing more than just the content of simile and narrative; he is reversing which one contains his real message.

We have already seen how Aeolus' winds can be interpreted allegorically as representing the destructive passions of civil war. Here, by putting a contemporary scene in a simile, Virgil hints that his *narrative* is 'really' imagery and the *simile* contains what the poem is 'really' about, the contemporary political situation at Rome and the ability (or inability) of men like Cicero, Cato, Caesar, and Augustus to use their authority to calm the frenzy which leads to civil war. Aeolus and Latinus, as we have seen, fail to do this. Neptune and the mysterious man in the simile succeed. Aeneas ends the poem hurling a spear like a whirlwind at Turnus and, inflamed by frenzy, plunges his sword into his enemy's chest. We are left to wonder whether the man who cannot control his own frenzy will be able to soothe it in the troubled breasts of others.

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